



Testimony in Support of S. 317

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Joint Committee on Election Laws

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The voting age has been 18 in every state since 1970, when former president Richard Nixon signed an extension of the Voting Rights Act. Now, over 40 years later, teens in Lowell are attempting to change the law to allow 17-year-old voters to cast ballots in municipal elections. If passed, Lowell would be the second city in the nation to lower the voting age, following Tacoma Park, Maryland that passed a similar measure on May 14, 2013.

There are various benefits associated with reducing the voting age. Research demonstrates that if a person votes for the first time when they are a teen, they are likely to generate life-long voting habits. Since at 17 a young voter is still a resident of their local community, he or she is more likely to be interested in participating in local elections. At 18, it is much more likely that a young voter may have recently moved to a new area for college or work and therefore could be less affected by the outcome of a municipal election.

There may also be a modest positive effect in overall voter participation in Lowell by passing this reform. Lowell typically has low turnout for municipal elections. It is not likely that this will substantially increase in coming years with the same electorate. Allowing 17-year-olds to cast a ballot could increase the representation of the younger generation and generate some excitement among the age-group, increasing participation.

A common argument in opposition to this proposal is that 17-year-olds are not mature or informed enough to vote. However, a research study completed in 2011 by professors Daniel Hart and Robert Atkins at Rutgers University found that 16 and 17-year-olds have the same amount of political knowledge as do 21-year-olds.¹

S. 317 is a homerule petition that has been passed by the Lowell City Council twice. If approved by the legislature, the voters of Lowell will then make the final decision regarding whether 17-year-olds can vote in their local elections. Since the teens would only be voting in municipal elections, the change would solely affect the voters in Lowell, not the entire state.

If enacted and then approved by the voters S. 317 would be a historic moment for both the city of Lowell and the state of Massachusetts and would expand the franchise to an enthusiastic cadre of young people. I urge you to pass S. 317 and allow this issue to appear as a city ballot question in November of 2013.

¹ Daniel Hart and Robert Atkins. "Sixteen- and Seventeen-Year-Olds Are Ready to Vote." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 663 (2011): 201, accessed May 13, 2013, doi: 10.1177/0002716210382395.